1/20/66

Almighty and Eternal God, thou who art omnipotent, above all and in all, we praise and adore thee. In the stillness of this moment our thoughts are of thee - but they are our thoughts, and we readily admit that they are not large enough to encompass thee. We have come into thy presence with singing: we praise thee with our voices, our minds, our gifts - but we do not pretend to know thee fully. Rather we come in humility - bowing down before thy mystery: standing in awe before thy gracious love. Hear our prayers, our Father, take up our act of worship - sanctify it with thy Holy Spirit - that it may be pleasing in thy sight. Through Jesus Christ - our Lord.

Now let us give thanks for all God has done for us. Let us thank him specifically for those things which have meant much to us in our personal lives. Let us pray silently.

O thou who hast provided for us - even before we are aware of our needs, we give thee thanks. We are grateful, our father for food and shelter, - for abundance which we have come to call necessity. We thank thee for all that gives our lives meaning: for love and friendship: for the joys and sorrows of our common life. We thank thee our Father, that in all things we live in the assurance of thy love - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray for peace - let us pray silently O thou who art the Father of all we pray for peace among men. We confess that we have not always achieved pe. - even with our neighbors. Our our failure prompts us to pray in humility and urgency - in the knowledge that only in thee will men ever realize their brotherhood. We pray for armed forces - for those we oppose - for the innocent victims. We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace - even J.C. our Lord.

Let us pray for guidance & direct. in our lives. - silently

O thou who art with us always - thou who seest & knowest everything we do, we ask thy guidance & direction. Help us to put Christ in our consciences: give us the courage of true Faith: give us strength to make decisions in the light of thy will. Be with us in all we do - helping us to live lives that are effective & Faithfull instruments of thine - through JC our Ld - who taught his disciples

Bread of Life March 20, 1966 John 6: 1-15

The portion of scripture I have just read is admittedly one of the most difficult in the four gospels. There aren't many sermons preached from this text - and I discovered in reading this week that even the scholarly commentaries do little more than assure the student that this is a difficult nut to crack. It's an important story: in fact it's the only miracle story that is included in all four gospel accounts. And so even though our initial reaction might be ~~is a~~ desire to ignore it, we cannot because of it's sheer weight in the gospel record.

This story, ~~and~~ like many others ~~like it~~ of a similar nature, is difficult for us to comprehend because we are not accustomed to thinking in terms of the miraculous. Granted, we use the word "miraculous" here employed rather frequently, in regard to the healing of a very sick child - or an escape from what appeared to be inevitable physical injury, We say "it's a miracle he's alive" and what we ususally mean is that what happened was improbable and exceptional and unexpected - but by no means impossible. The physical laws of nature as far as we understand them were not broken or violated. But this is not so with our scripture lesson this morning. It's a long way between a person near death, responding to treatment and returning to health, and the multiplication of five loaves and two fishes into enough food to accomodate 5,000 men. We have all experienced the former or something similar at some time or another, but I would hazard the guess that no one here has ever experienced anything of remotely like the latter/

The miracles of Jesus fall into two categories, roughly: the healings and the nature miracles. Walking on the water, turning the water into wine and the feeding of 5,000 are illustrations of the latter. They are called nature miracles because they involve a basic contradiction of the laws of the natural world. Logically they could not happen: they are, in our frame of reference - quite impossible. And yet they stand in the Biblical account, in this case, as an important part of the Gospael tradtion.. And

so if we are to render even a semblence of integrity to the tradition we can't just ignore the story. Something happened, something important enough to find it's way into all four Gospels.

There are four different approaches we can take to this particular passage. The first is the approach of literalism- that is, that the account is literally true: that Jesus took these small scraps of fodd and made them into enough to literally feed 5,000 people. There are many problems here and the first is that many of us simply can't believe that: furthermore we don't believe that the miraculous, in this sense, is the way God has shown himself to be working in his world. But the most serious problem of all with this approach, is that having brought ourselves to beleive it we are left with a miracle-worker and little else. There is, of course, more here that that: the passage has more to say to us than that Jesus was capable of breaking the laws of nature whenever he desired.

The second approach is to regard the entire story as myth, something fabricated by Mark and copied by the other writers. It is to say that nothing happened at all, and that the story was incorporated into Christian literature in order to persuade people that Jesus was the Divine Son of God. The obvious problem here is that it calls into question everything in the Bible including the very existence of Jesus: something that even the most hostile critic of the faith cannot do. Critical historical scholars are now admitting the the events of the Old Testament, without exception are rooted in some great historical event that can be traced. The Bible, while not pretneding to be a historical chronicle, nevertheless is grounded in tangible experiences which did happen. In short, without throwing the entire Bible out the window we have to come to the minimum conclusion that something did happen, something very important.

The third approach is to try to understand and explain the story logically. Many have tried to do this: One scholar suggests that Jesus and the disciples cut the fish and bread into extremely tiny pieces, and that the crowd was filled vicariously by this example of unselfish love. Another suggests that many people in the crowd did have food concealed under their robes and were moved to reveal and share it by Jesus example. In the case of walking on the water the same approach would suggest that there were stones immediately beneath the surface which supported Jesus while he walked. I personally reject this apporach because it is based on pure conjecture, and in that again, it guides us away from the essential meaning of the whole passage. It is easy to become so engrossed in understanding how the miracles took place that the truly important questions of why and what they mean are never asked.

The fourth approach , and the one I would recommend to you, ought to be emerging at this point. In a sense it could be called an "unapproach" because it begins with the admission that we don't know what happened. We were not there--neither was the man who wrote the 4th gospel--in fact for that matter he never wrote anything down until 70 years after the crucifixion. It is an approach based on integrity. It admits doubt; it admits that our minds don't adapt to the thought of 2 fishes and 5 loaves becoming enough food to satisfy 5,000. But mostimportantly it remains open to this story, continuing to examine, discuss and think abut it, because it assumes that there is something there that we need to hear. It is an open-minded, intellectually honest approach, within the conviction that the Bible is the word of God, and that God does address his people by means of it.

I want to emphasize this because there are those today who would make belief in the Bible a matter of Christian orthodoxy. They would make of the

Bible an inerrant historical record, absolutely correct in every respect. They would turn back the clock hundreds of years to the pre scientific era, when Biblical faith was not threatened by the laboratory discovery. But most harmfully, they are saying that a Christian must have faith in the Bible--the same kind of faith that he has in God through Jesus Christ.

The U.P.C., of course, does not take this stand, and yet it has been my experience that many of us still linger on the fringe of fundamentalism. Secretly we admire the person who can believe that the fish swallowed Jonah and that Adam and Eve actually walked around a garden in the Euphrates valley 4,684 years ago. We think it is somehow more Christian to believe that creation took seven 24 hr. days instad of 7 billion years. Even though we don't abide by it personally, we believe that a Christian must put blind faith in the Bible.

To all of this, the approach I am suggesting says an emphatic NO. In fact, it's about time U.Presby. stop acting like second-rate Christians and aggressively pursue what we blieve is the correct approach to the Bible. We believe it is the word of God; God uses it to address us when we read in the faith. It is not, and never was intended to be a wordl almanac, a book of history, a scientific text book; and to make it such is to do violence to its word and intent--as well as to shut out the voice of God which might be speaking to us through it.

Now employing this approach let's return to the passage in question. We don't know what happened; all we do know is that something transpired that had significant meaning for the early Christians--and that can have a similarly significant meaning for us.

It is clear, within this context then, that Jesus Christ is here portrayed as a man who provides a very necessary ingredient to the life of man. In fact he did, at another time, say ("I am the bread of life.") This is what the gospel writers continually say about him; that true life is just as impossible without Jesus Christ, as it is without food.

That is the audacious claim of Christianity, and today it is more difficult to make that claim effectively and faithfully than at any other time in history. We live today in what has been called a "secular society" That means that we lived in a cultureand society that is basically unreligious; the religious props have been pulled out from under our culture and man suddenly finds himself alone in the universe. The process of secularization began long ago during the enlightenment when men of reason first began to seriously doubt the claims of Roman Catholic Christn. Until that time the entirety of life was infused with the presence of Religion ~~Christianity~~. Theology was regarded as the ("queen of the sciences;") art and music dealt solely with religious themes. Once the basic assumptionso of this comfortable situation were questioned, however, the entire structure began to crumble. And today we live in a culture that has little room for God. As a people we don't seriously believe that God has anything to do with our affairs. The N.T. might contend that J.C. is the bread of life but at the same time we can look around us and see the bast majoirty of people doing quite well without him. We live in a secular world; ~~a world that seems to do very well apart from religion as a cultural force.~~ Now this is not a judgement, only a statement of fact. Indeed the secularization of culture has Forced Christianity to be honest; it has forced the church to define precisely what it means; it has made it impossible to rely on the assumption that everyone will believe it simply because a priest or a minister says it. It has put us on the spot when we make a statement like ("Jesus Christ is the bread of life") for the world we live in quite frankly, is saying "put up or shutup."

Our text indicates that Jesus was followed by a great crowd; that he fed them and they were filled. In what sense can we say that about ourselves? In what sense can we honestly say that Jesus Christ provides an essential ingredient to our lives? that our relationship with him is a fulfilling satisfying thing upon which we are completely dependent?

The Gospel writers based their message on the assumption that natural man, man as he is, secular man, is only part of what he could be. In a manner of speaking, apart from God, he is only half a man. The well-known parable of the prodigal son is a good case in point. The younger son, you will remember wanted to be free from his dependence on his father; he wanted to be released from the strictures of the father-son relationship. And so he claimed his part of the inheritance and left his father's house to go to a far country. There he wasted his money and sank to the depths of degradation. Life apart from his father was not what he thought it would be; the very freedom he was seeking turned out to be a demonic thing that reduced him to a fragment of the man he was and could be. And then "he came to himself" and returned to his father's house; where true freedom; true life--fulfilling, satisfying life could be found. His father accepted him back.

This is what the Christian faith assumes about us and all men. We long to be independent; we seek freedom from dependence on anyone, anything. We want to leave the father's house and live apart from him--masters of our own destiny. But, things do not work out for us either. The prodigal son encountered disaster; he lost his money and was forced to resort to swine herding to make a living. For us, of course, the result of life apart from God, is not necessarily so dramatically vivid. The secularization of our culture, has taught us that physical well-being is never related to religious faith. In fact, it is generally conceded in the world of big business that a strongly Christian man does not have the potential to reach the very top. And yet we are no longer in a position to say "believe in Jesus Christ or else" because it simply isn't true.

How then, can we believe that Jesus Christ is the breadof life? If we have no tangible proof--on what basis can we make this radial claim? All that we have--and all that is important--is our own experience--our own feeling-knowledge of what it is to be a child of God--to know the love and judgement and presence of God in our lives; to know that we are in--a father-son relationship with him from whom we came--and to whom we will ultimately go. All we have is the common stuff of our own lives--and the awareness that we are living out our lives in God's sight and in line with his will.

It is impossible to pursue this much further without becoming intnesely personnal--and ~~this I~~ must do. I don't care to think about my life--my work my experiences with my family--my recreastion and enjoyment apart from the assurance that God cares; that my deepest anxieties are his concerns; that what I do matters to him. To me, and I am certain that I speak for many others--this knowledge this feeling, experiencing thing that I can't escape is the bread of life. Now, I know many people who live apart from this; people who are completely secular, in that the very thought of Godhas nothing whatever to do with their lives. They're doing well; they will succeed; they will be happy. And yet there is something missing and more often than not they know it. There will be plenty of money, vacations, a measure of effluence; but almost invariably there comes a time--in middlelage when the terrifying thought occurs that this is it. I'm going to die and I've probably lived more than half my life alreay--and whatever there is about it I've already experienced it. Sooner or later--everyman findshimself eyeball to eyeball with his destiny and the total meaning of his life and discovered that, all things considered it doesn't add up to very much.

I'm the last person in the world to say that at this point all a man has to do is to run back to the Church. I put little sock in easy, pipous